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The Future Is Now, Part II

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Making Magic
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Welcome to the second week of *Future Sight* previews. This week I'll be continuing the story of *Future Sight* design that I began [last week](#) (if the "Part II" wasn't a clear enough clue). I'll also be showing you yet another preview card, because hey, what would a preview column be without a preview card? And... well, that's pretty much all I'll be doing, but I promise to take over four thousand words to do it.



Previously on "The Future Is Now":

After coming up with the idea of a block with a time motif, Mark pitched the idea of breaking the three sets into past, present and future. While everyone seemed to get the "past" set and a few got the "alternate reality present" set, no one, save Mark, seemed to understand how the future set was going to be designed. Even Mark hadn't quite figured out how to verbalize what he instinctually believed was the right way to go. If that wasn't enough, just before design was to begin, Mark learned that scheduling had changed things around, moving the start date of design a month earlier. That is, a month into the past. Future Sight, then codenamed "Pop" (of "Snap," "Crackle," and "Pop"), one of the toughest designs Mark had ever faced, would have to be done with one less month than normal.

Seeing the Future

Future Sight design was a daunting task. To accomplish it, I was going to have to put together a somewhat unconventional team. (By the way, I was quite touched that a number of readers were concerned that I hadn't announced the design team in the first preview column. It is something I always do, and it was nice that people missed it enough to write in. Fear not, though, I postponed my team rundown for this week because it fit in today's section of my multi-part story.) To accomplish what I needed, I decided that I was going to break two key design team rules.

First, most design teams have between three and five members, with four being the most common number. For *Future Sight* I decided that I needed a bigger team. Why? Because I knew that we'd be stretching more than normal and I felt like having a lot of different designers would be beneficial. Second, most sets tend to have a majority of experienced designers. Usually a design team will only have one "virgin" designer (only one person who's never been on a design team before). For *Future Sight*, I threw that rule out the window. As you will see, this "throw that rule out the window" mentality would continue for the length of the design.

So without further ado, let me present the design team for *Future Sight*:

Mark Rosewater (lead designer)

In the spectrum of design from easy to difficult, *Time Spiral* block leans heavily in direction of the latter. But of all three sets, I knew *Future Sight* was going to be the trickiest (and trust me neither *Time Spiral* or *Planar Chaos* were easy by any standards). Plus, the set was going to be teasing all sorts of things from the future. As the Head Designer, it's my job to plot design out numerous years so we have an idea of where we're going. As no one else has spent as much time thinking about where the design is headed as me, it was clear that I was the obvious choice to lead *Future Sight's* design. I've talked numerous times in this column about one of the things I love about my job is that it constantly provides me with creative challenges. *Future Sight* would definitely deliver in this area.



Devin Low

After me, Devin is the veteran of this group having been on four design teams prior to *Future Sight* (*Betrayers of Kamigawa*, *Coldsnap*, *Guildpact*, and *Time Spiral*). I chose to add Devin to the team because he's a very solid designer both creatively and analytically. He comes up with interesting takes on cards and he's always looking at the set from a different vantage point from myself. Devin, like Aaron (Forsythe) has proven very adept at both design and development. In fact, he is the development lead for this fall's big set, *Lorwyn*.



Mark Gottlieb

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Mark is the third most experienced member of the team, having actually worked on another **Magic** design team before (*Dissension*). Now, some people might claim that I chose Mark because he's insanely creative or because he has a very unique insight or because having the rules manager on a set that by definition has to break more rules than average would be handy. My official line is that you keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Besides, how better to drive the rules manager mad than to put him on a team where he has to design cards that he will later have to kill? (And this happened numerous times. Bwah ha ha ha! Wait, I keep forgetting that only the villain does the "bwah ha ha ha" laugh. I mean, ho, ho, ho! Great, now I sound like Santa Claus.)



Matt Cavotta

Now we come to our first new designer. If you don't know Matt, I strongly urge you to go to the archive of his column ([Taste the Magic](#)). When I first hired Matt I told him that I was interested in having him on a design team at some point. Matt thought it was a great idea and told me to just let him know what set would be the right time. While compiling the *Future Sight* team, I knew that I wanted some "out of the box" thinkers, and I very quickly thought of Matt. I knew Matt would approach design from a very different place than the rest of the team. (Matt is one of a handful of **Magic** artists to ever serve on a design team.) My gut was dead-on, as Matt had a very distinctive creative voice for the run of the design.



Ryan Miller

A little-known secret: we actually produce games at Wizards of the Coast other than **Magic: the Gathering**. Ryan, seen to the right in one of his numerous sketch comedy and improv appearances in the Seattle area, is one of the designers who works on those "other" games. As the guy in charge of finding design talent, I'm always keeping my eye on all of the designers in R&D. Ryan is one of those people I'd been watching, and I was just looking for the right team to use him. *Future Sight* seemed perfect, as I knew Ryan could find new veins of design because he wasn't all that familiar with the old ones. I've talked numerous times about how working on designs of other games helps **Magic** design. The same is true for having designers approach **Magic** with the mindset of other games. Such was the value that Ryan added to this set (and as you will see, this set is all about finding new approaches).



Zvi Mowshowitz

Zvi is a longtime pro player who has a high chance of being inducted into the Pro Tour Hall of Fame later this year. At the time of *Future Sight* design, Zvi was the development intern. Zvi had shown interest in being on a design team, and as I felt with Matt and Ryan, *Future Sight* seemed like a good fit. I really enjoyed working with Zvi and was quite intrigued to see what kind of ideas his mind came up with.



So that was my team: five designers whose previous combined **Magic** design was five sets (four of which were Devin). It was a raw team, but one filled with endless potential. As you will see, we were going to need it.

When The Future Comes Knocking

Future Sight had its design team—as well as its shorter than normal schedule, which meant that we had to hit the ground running. I started the first meeting by saying that we had several non-negotiables to work with:

- #1 – We were going to have "timeshifted" cards. These cards would have a unique frame and be from the future (whatever we decided that meant). The timeshifted cards were not creatively limited to Dominaria.
- #2 – We were going to have some non-timeshifted cards that would appear in their normal frames. The non-timeshifted cards were from the current setting, post-apocalyptic Dominaria.
- #3 – We were going to carry through the four new keyworded mechanics from the *Time Spiral* block (flash, split second, suspend and vanishing) into *Future Sight*, although some could show up in smaller quantities. Some of them, if not all, had to have new twists.
- #4 – We had to have some new keywords, as all **Magic** sets nowadays introduce new keywords. (This one would prove not to be a problem.)
- #5 – The set would be at least as big as *Planar Chaos*. (That is, 165 cards. *Future Sight* would be pushed to 180 in design to make more room for timeshifted cards.)

Other than these five points, everything else was left up to the team. We started by tackling the first non-negotiable as we all knew it was what was going to define the set. *Future Sight* needed to have cards timeshifted from the future much like *Time Spiral* had cards timeshifted from the past. The big question was: What did that mean? What counts as being from the future?

The first and simplest idea was to only print cards that we knew we could print in the future. That way each and every card you saw in the timeshifted frame was a card you knew would return one day. My problem with this idea was twofold. First, part of the reason I wanted future timeshifted cards in the first place was that I wanted to tease hints about the future. If everything was simply known as something that was going to happen, I think it would take away a lot of the fun of allowing the public to try and deduce which parts they felt were going to see again in the future.

Second, the logistics of making sure every card had a home in a future set was a daunting one. Yes, we could make sure there are homes for some cards (and there are), but forcing us to be able to reprint anything would really hamper what we could do with the cards. It's much harder to push the envelope when you don't have any outs down the road.

That's when I chimed up with my belief that a world with intermingling futures is much more interesting if there are multiple possible futures. This is where my love of comic books popped up again. In the Marvel universe



(the world where Spider-man, the X-Men, and the Fantastic Four all exist), there are numerous characters from the future, but Marvel made a conscious choice that the characters come from different futures. Many characters, in fact, come from conflicting futures (as an example there are two characters, one male and one female, that are each the first child of the X-Men Cyclops and Phoenix—who both showed up before Cyclops and Phoenix had any kids).

In my mind, the future is pretty amorphous. As the past and the present commingle with it, it should be in constant flux. Things that you see might come to pass but they might as easily not come to pass. The thing I like about this take on the future is that it both allowed us to have a lot more fun with the players, and it let us push the envelope in many ways we otherwise wouldn't and couldn't.

What this means is that the future timeshifted cards hint at the future in many ways. They might be cards directly from the future. They might show off mechanics from the future even if this particular card never comes to exist. They could show off new areas of design. They could hint at future elements of Creative, everything from worlds we might visit to naming conventions we might one day adopt to new artists who might later become **Magic** staples. In short, embracing the idea of "possible futures" allowed us the most freedom to do some very cool stuff. All we had to do now was make up that cool stuff.



The Line in the Sand

The team talked at length about what the dividing line was between the timeshifted and non-timeshifted cards. While we knew any line we created would be somewhat blurry, we felt it was crucial to the feel of the set that the timeshifted cards were unique. In the end we made the following distinction: the future timeshifted cards had to have some element about them that felt like virgin territory. That is, when players looked at a timeshifted card, they should feel like it was hinting at something that **Magic** doesn't currently do. This is a lot harder than it sounds as what feels like new territory is very subjective. In fact, there are a few timeshifted cards that I still feel aren't as far over the line as I'd like, but in general, I'm very happy with the overall feel we created.

An offshoot of this decision was that we decided not to add any new keywords to the non-timeshifted cards. We did add some old keywords, but I'll cover that when I get to the non-timeshifted side. In addition, we also decided not to do too many of any one keyword. Originally, we decided that every new keyword would show up at least twice but never more than four times. We chose two as the minimum as we were trying to lessen the amount of new keywords you had to learn, and we capped at four because we thought that any more would feel like too many cards coming from the same place.

When Design turned in the set to Development, I believe all the new keywords ended up in twos or threes. Fours just felt like too much of the same thing in a set trying to feel that everything was from someplace different. During development, it was decided that it was okay to have some of the keywords show up just once.

Next we decided that any mechanical advancement of a mechanic (that is doing something new with a mechanic that makes it play differently than previous versions) would be restricted to the timeshifted cards. The one exception was the mechanics that were unique to *Time Spiral* block (once again – flash, split second, suspend and vanishing). Some of these advancements led to new keywords that were offshoots of old ones (with things like transfigure and slivercycling). Other advancements were just new twists that didn't require any new key wording.

Finally, we decided that since the new frames were already taking up the space of new visuals that we wouldn't do anything on the non-timeshifted side that required changing the frames.

To Boldly Go

Normally on a **Magic** set, the team spends some time coming up with one or more new ideas, and then we flesh them out over many cards. This early brainstorming for innovation I call the "angst stage," as it is creatively the most demanding time. *Future Sight* was the opposite of this. Any new idea, by definition of the set, had to be limited to just a few cards. This meant that the timeshifted cards required the "angst stage" throughout all of design, which is very punishing on the design team because it's the hardest and most stressful part.

On top of that, we had another interesting restriction. We wanted to tease the future, but at the same time we didn't want to just give it all away. Part of selling **Magic** sets is the surprise of the new thing. If we gave away all our new things it would negatively impact the future marketing of sets. This meant that we had to be innovative but not too innovative. We had to tease good stuff but not tease all of our best stuff.

This restriction, along with the desire to have a nostalgic feel, forced us to examine logical extensions of known mechanics. This is, in fact, where we started. I asked the team to think of any mechanics they liked from the past. "Now do something with it," I said, "that we haven't done yet." The more obvious, the better, because it both wasn't giving up brand spanking new innovation and it had the "I knew they'd do that one day" feel that we wanted. This, by the way, is the reason that *Future Sight* overlaps so much with the cards from [The Great Designer Search](#). *Future Sight* design was completed long before the search for the first design intern began, but as both items forced the designers to find innovation from what's been done before, the two tended to overlap quite a bit.

Once we farmed out extensions of known mechanics, I then moved the team onto working on the ideas of the blocks I knew were upcoming. I've talked about this before, but I'm required to work out a five-year plan. That is, I have to have an idea of what exactly we're going to do over the next five years. This allows me to think big picture about how we want to use and save different ideas. For *Future Sight*, this advance work allowed the team to brainstorm on ideas I knew we were going to get to in the near to mid future. It's interesting to point out that some ideas that the design team turned in were killed in development because the idea needed too much work before we'd be willing to print it. This was a little heads-up to me about what things I've been planning will most worry the developers.

After the known near future, we next turned our attention to the backlog of mechanics that we've created over the years. Oftentimes in a design we'll end up creating something that we like but that either doesn't fit with what's going on in the set or gets bumped for space (often early design packs more in a design file than fits). Some of these ideas are ones that we want to save, but a number of others were ripe for picking. A similar vein of material that functions kind of like our backlog is the mechanics from the *Un*-sets. Ideas that start off as too crazy for "normal" **Magic** cross over much more than I thought they would when I first designed *Unglued*. In fact, there are a number of cards in *Future Sight* that were directly inspired by *Un*-cards, although ironically most of them are on the non-timeshifted side. (Once again, I'll talk about that when I get to the non-timeshifted part of the design.)

The next vein of design space we explored was areas that R&D as a whole is unsure that we want to explore. One of the values of having future-shifted cards is that it allows us to test the waters in a way that gives us an easy out later. Seeing that this was a rare opportunity, I actively asked the team (as well as the rest of R&D) to come up with any ideas worthy of testing.

Finally, we turned to what I call the "red herrings." I felt that an important part of mixing things up and keeping players guessing was to include some ideas that we are sure we're never doing. Why include things that we have no intention of doing, and thus by doing them in this set actually do? Because I wanted to send the message that just because we are giving you a peek into the future doesn't mean we are giving away all our secrets. Plus, this was a rare opportunity to do a few of the things that I felt we don't want to do—and in a way that didn't force our hand to do more in the future. And, last but not least, it gives us some plausible deniability. Just because you see it in the timeshifted set doesn't mean it's crossed the line into mainstream **Magic** design.

The end result of this was that *Future Sight* was both more challenging and more freeing than most designs. I won't lie to you, making timeshifted cards was quite hard, and many more of them got killed in development than happens on average. This meant that we did more hole-filling (new cards designed during development to replace cards that are killed) with the timeshifted cards than we do normally. That meant that the "angst stage" continued well into development. But I'm quite happy with the stuff we came up with. You have to look pretty deep into your designer soul to find stuff like "[enchant an instant card in your graveyard](#)."



Gimme Five

One of the best tools of a **Magic** designer is the cycle. (Go check out my column [Zen and the Art of Cycle Maintenance](#) for more on cycle design.) How does one use cycles when every card is supposed to represent a nod to a different potential future? We came up with several novel answers:

#1 - A cycle made up of all new keywords – We knew we wanted to have slivers, but we were running into a problem. We'd made slivers that granted just about every mechanic that existed. That's when we hit upon a great idea: how about a cycle of timeshifted slivers that granted abilities that didn't (yet) exist?

#2 – A cycle connected thematically (and with a new keyword) – While brainstorming ways to show "the future" we came up with the idea of legendary creatures that were descendents, offspring, or spiritual followers of known legends. We joked that one card would be Son of Squee. Anyway, we ended up making a cycle of legends that are all [throwbacks to previously existing legends](#). We also had a new mechanic that went on legendary creatures, so we included it on all five.

#3 – A cycle that isn't restricted to the timeshifted cards – My second favorite cycle (we're getting to my favorite next) is one where four cards of the cycle are non-timeshifted and one is timeshifted (yes, this trick was done with the charms in *Planar Chaos* – it's still cool). Four of the cards reflect the past, and one the future. You'll know it when you see it.

#4 – A cycle made up of cycles – When trying to crack the timeshifted cycle problem, I came up with this novel idea. What if we made a cycle that was made up of cards from different cycles. That is, what if each card in the cycle was a representative of a different five-card cycle. This way each card would be unique, yet they would still hang together as a cycle. To see what we came up with (or at least see a preview and get an idea what the whole cycle is about), check out Aaron's column ([Latest Developments](#)) this Friday.

The Other Side

That about covers the timeshifted cards. How about the non-timeshifted? For that, my faithful readers, you're going to have to come back next week. Yes, there's a Part III, where I'm going to talk about designing the part of the set that wasn't plucked from the future. Remember that we had to come up with cool stuff that didn't step on

the toes of the timeshifted cards and didn't use any new keywords. (Don't worry, we came up with plenty of neat cards.)

Join me next week when I do just that.

Until then, may you approach...

What? Did I forget to show you a preview card again? Sometimes I just get all caught up in my column and, well, I kind of forget. I actually have something interesting. Since I didn't get to the non-timeshifted cards in this column, why don't I show one to you so you can get an idea of one of the cool design veins we found to tap into?

This is one of the cards that I call "mix & match." There are a significant number of them in the non-timeshifted part of the set.

Click [here](#) to see what I'm talking about.



Join me next week when I talk about the origin of mix & match and explain how we decided what abilities would end up paired together. And please have fun guessing in the thread what mix & match combinations might show up. Enough of a teaser?

That's it for today. I hope you all get a chance to head out to the [Future Sight prerelease](#) this weekend. I promise you a higher jaw-drop ratio than any other set barring *Un-sets*. Remember to drop back next week for Part III.

Until then, may you learn to embrace the "angst stage" of your own life.

Mark Rosewater

*Mark Rosewater is Head **Magic** Designer. What this fancy title means is that he's in charge of **Magic** design. This gets him a lot of mail (which he actually reads). When not alternatively destroying and saving **Magic**, he likes to spend time with his family, do stereotypically geeky things (play games, read comics, watch a lot of science fiction, etc.) and write about himself in third person.*



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